The Misanthrope's Turtle

By Florence King
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This seems to be the season for chipping away at the diminishing rock of my childhood. First Jimmy Stewart died, and then Woolworth's five-and-ten announced that it was going out of business.

To be honest, Stewart was the antithesis of my taste in men. The lovable boy-next-door type has always irritated me, and physically he turned me off because he was too tall and skinny. Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and five-foot-ten is more my style, but I liked Stewart anyway because he was there. Where childhood memories are concerned, thereness is what counts. I probably wouldn't shop at a Woolworth's today, but I want it to be there, and now it won't be, not ever again.

Woolworth's needed no Official Greeters. The moment you walked in you were enveloped in an overpowering aroma of hot sweetness issuing from the sugary batter in the doughnut fryer, the boiling caramel in the candied-apple machine, the flavored syrups that were drizzled over crushed ice to make snowballs, and the mountains of candy corn, butterfingers, and chunked-up chocolate in the cavernous food bins.

The sweet smell was a year-round fixture. In summer when the doors sat open, it wafted out to the street. In winter the hissing steam heat trapped it inside and mixed it with the cloying scents of the cosmetics counter, where they sold big blue bottles of Evening in Paris perfume, cans of dusting powder named Quelques Fleurs and Djer Kiss (which no one could pronounce), and tiny satin bags of gardenia sachet to scatter in bureau drawers — or, for serious wafters, to tuck into bras.

The hardwood floors were black with age and squeaked, just like the floors of our apartment. The store served our regular needs — a ten-cent envelope of phonograph needles, Granny's advanced knitting books with instructions to rival the quantum theory — as well as some highly irregular ones, e.g., the glittery earrings my father bought to decorate the head of the banjo he made, the oil my mother used to soften her baseball glove, and my penknife fixation.

It was at Woolworth's that I got my first pet: a miniature turtle that I persuaded Granny to buy me before we went to the movies. They put him in a white pasteboard carton, like Chinese take-out, and I named him Mergatroyd after a cartoon character.

During the movie I kept whispering "Hello, Mergatroyd" and sticking my finger in the box to pet him. I couldn't wait to get home and make him a rock garden, but Granny was absorbed in *Back Street*, which met her definition of a good movie ("She dies in the end"). At long last, when the movie ended and the lights came on, I opened the box to check on Mergatroyd, but he was as dead as Margaret Sullivan.

I burst into tears and ran up the aisle. "She's not old enough to understand about kept women," somebody whispered in disapproval,

which made me cry harder. Granny offered to buy me another turtle but I wanted only Mergatroyd. Nor would I let her ask for a refund because that put him on a level with light bulbs or a can opener. I wanted to give him a funeral, so back we went to Woolworth's to buy a soap dish for a coffin and two tongue-depressors to make a cross.

The orgasmic transports that today's retailers call a "shopping experience" swept through Woolworth's on December 8, 1941, when a man began smashing everything stamped "Made in Japan." No security guards converged on him and no one worried about lawsuits. As the crowd cheered, the manager winked and said, "I needed to get rid of this stuff today anyhow."

It would have been futile to expect my mother to stay out of the fray. Grabbing an illustrated teapot, she was about to sidearm it, shortstop-style, against the wall, but just then Granny showed up, waving a length of hat veiling she had been inspecting when she heard the ruckus.

"Oh, Louise! I turn my back for a minute and you act like white trash!"

"I'm going to break every piece of junk those sneaky grinning runts ever made!"

"Then go home and break your ashtrays where nobody can see you!"

She did — and bought new ones stamped "Made in U.S.A." from Woolworth's.

Besides the infinite variety of its stock, Woolworth's offered the masses an ongoing morality tale in Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth heiress who went through six husbands and $50 million. Her Babylonian high jinks were chronicled regularly in newsreels, and since the dime-store was a block from the movie theater, the audience usually was eating something from her redolent candy bins as we watched her exchange vows with yet another playboy.

"Money can't buy happiness," said Granny through her salt-water taffy.

"Oh, shit!" Mama snorted. "It can if you do it right. She should have been made to work in a Woolworth's for a few years, find out where her money comes from, and learn the business from the ground up so she could run it herself. Then she wouldn't have time to get mixed up with all those lounge lizards." Leave it to Mama to define real feminism and responsible capitalism in one breath: an unassisted double play.

Such easy lessons are impossible in a non-Woolworth's economy; how can you have a Barbara Hutton if you have to do research in Forbes to find out who really owns a store? It also takes plutocrats of variegated swath to personify the titanic ruin that makes for a really effective I-told-you-so morality play. Bill Gates could become another Jack the Ripper but it's doubtful that anyone could think of anything memorable to say about it.

Today I shop from catalogues whenever possible to avoid characterless suburban malls. "I found a million-dollar baby in Foot Locker" lacks something. "Diamond bracelets Wal-Mart's doesn't sell" scans, but despite their eternally falling prices Wal-Mart's comes up short in that raffish gypsy-pushcart atmosphere I loved.

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